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CRITICAL NOTES

THE SIGNIFICANCE OF THE NICENE CREED: A REPLY TO PROFESSOR FAULKNER

In the January number of the *American Journal of Theology*,¹ Professor Faulkner discusses the creed of Nicaea with apparently two interests in view. He regards the formulation and enforcement of the creed of Nicaea as necessary in order to preserve Christianity in the world. He aims also to see the Arian view of the fourth century as a kind of sideshoot from the main growth of doctrine as we find it in the second and third centuries. The argument seems to be that to combat the Modalist's denial of an independent personality of Christ, Origen and other Fathers had declared the subordination of the Son and that Lucian of Antioch and Arius thereupon seize upon this defective phase of Origen's thought and develop it logically into a Christology with the intention of denying the deity of Christ. This presentation views Arianism as a kind of aberration from a true historical development. In this argument Dr. Faulkner makes use of historical data which for the most part need not be called in question, though I am unable to see a justification for some of his estimates of character and motive. It is not clear that Athanasius and Dr. Faulkner are justified in pronouncing the Arians slippery. If there is one party whose theological view is sharply defined and stoutly defended it is theirs. What Athanasius counted craftiness (*Ad Afros* 5) was the Arian willingness to assent to scriptural expressions while they rebelled at the term *homoousios* which to him, though not to them, was the necessary meaning of the scriptural language. But while I do not share the suspicions of Athanasius about the integrity of the Arians and count it a blemish when he attributes low cunning to them or styles them men born of a dunghill, my sympathy is very naturally with Athanasius as a theologian and against the Arians for a reason that may surprise Dr. Faulkner. The reason is that I am a Unitarian. Dr. Channing, of blessed memory, began his life with a somewhat indistinct Arian view of Christ; but, with improved knowledge of the history of Christian thought, Unitarians soon passed from that position, and, while far from being disciples of Athanasius, rejoiced in the failure of Arianism. I consider that an effort to make this clear may promote a

¹ Professor John Alfred Faulkner, "The First Great Christian Creed."

good understanding among men and assist in the comprehension of the whole matter under discussion. Why Arius does not satisfy us is apparent. We are all dealing with an interpretation of the being known to us in the gospels, and Arius had arrived at a view which substitutes for the man Jesus a being who is neither God nor man, a semi-deity who had nothing human about him except the physical body needed for activity on earth. Man's knowledge of God is thus derived from a finite, created, superhuman being who himself had no complete knowledge of God. The conception not only sacrifices the humanity of Jesus but banishes God himself from the universe in which we live. It would be absurd for a modern Unitarian to espouse the conception of Arius.

Dr. Faulkner alludes to a view that Jesus "was a mere man in the recent Unitarian sense," but possibly he has forgotten or failed to grasp what Unitarians may mean by man. There are occasional rebels against orthodoxy who rest content with the disclaimer of orthodoxy, but the Unitarianism with which I am familiar has a very positive and affirmative tradition of thought. What Channing meant by his "one sublime idea" of the dignity of human nature has usually been carried to a more metaphysical expression. Not content with a mere repudiation of Augustine's or Calvin's doctrine of human depravity; not content with the proclamation that the moral sentiment is integral to man, and that with all their varying degrees of infirmity men are reflexes of the divine character, becoming men in the truest and most essential sense in proportion as they mirror the character of God; not content with this the Unitarian has sought to affirm a sufficient ground for his estimate of man by the view that human personalities are concretions of the universal divine consciousness, so that in a metaphysical sense and not in a mere sense of moral responsiveness, men are the children of God. One illustrative utterance is Dr. Martineau's: "God plants out self-conscious and self-directing minds, infinitesimal repetitions of himself with the divine characteristics of spiritual being" (letter to Rev. W. H. Fish in Carpenter's *James Martineau, Theologian and Teacher*, p. 593). That Unitarians have not carried this belief out into a sharply expressed formula is because of some doubt as to the success of any such effort on the part of any. That the human personality is rooted and grounded in God is a faith held on the compulsion of religious experience. The exact intellectual formulation of it is less important. Should anyone object that the faith cannot avail without the formula he may well bethink himself that the Christian church had protracted difficulties in finding a formula for the same relationship of human and divine in the case of Christ and that the formula of Chalcedon is not so much a

real statement of the relationship as a correction of divergent extreme tendencies which would sacrifice either the human or the divine. If Dr. Faulkner were speaking of Aloys Biedermann's correction of *Gott-Mensch* in the interest of *Gotteskindschaft* he would avoid crediting to Biedermann the notion that Jesus was "a mere man." By the same token I am puzzled by the allusion to "a recent Unitarian" attitude.

We are now able to consider the Christology of the Fathers. All Christians believed that there was a divine background to the life and personality of Jesus. The dynamist spoke of the heavenly power of spirit given Jesus for his work. The Modalist made all but the material body identical with the one only God. The first seems to have been coolly and empirically accounting for superhuman marvels. The second seems to have been using the analogy of pagan myths of divine apparitions on earth, with a fatal sacrifice of the humanity of the being presented in our gospels. A third party which may be called the Hypostatic party considered Jesus as uniting his humanity with a Hypostasis or agent of deity. The Trinitarian controversy was about the relation of this divine Hypostasis to God the Father. It is enough to say that Athanasius so defined the relation as to preserve the full deity of the divine brought near in Jesus, repudiating any semi-polytheistic Arian notion of a Hypostasis finite and lower than God, and affirming a unity of Word and God so complete that his critics complained of a loss of numerical distinction. The critics spoke for a philosophy or science which needed the separation of the Hypostasis or Logos in order to solve the metaphysical enigma of a manifold world sprung from an absolute unity. They needed to think of a creative agent who mediated absolute unity and the manifold creation. Athanasius was less concerned about science and metaphysics. The pressure in him was a religious motive, and though he did not express the religious interest in a manner congenial to modern times, he rendered a service by clamoring in the name of religion for the faith that the divine seen in the companionship of Jesus was no "second God" but a divine identical in essence with the Father. In his address on *The Trinity and Modern Thought*, Dr. William Adams Brown justly says, "The Deity of Christ, as Athanasius conceived it, meant the substitution of the present God of Christian faith for the abstract and transcendent God of philosophy." It is true that for Athanasius there still remained a puzzling discrimination of Logos and Father and that the religious apprehension of God was expressed as an apprehension of the Logos rather than of the Father. This was due to the doctrinal history that lay back of him. Nevertheless I hope now to have made it evident why a Unitarian sympathizes with Athanasius rather

than with Arius. It is because Athanasius was trying to say that God himself and not a subordinate being was the mysterious background of the life of Jesus. Origen and the Unitarian Paul of Samosata were in substantial agreement as to the manner in which the man Jesus evidenced the divine companionship. He had a unison of thought and will and love with the One who anointed him with the oil of gladness above his fellows. But the bishop of Antioch meant that this unison was between the man Jesus and the one only divine Person. Origen conceived it as a unison with "the second God," the hypostatic Logos. Athanasius insisted that the Logos thus humanly expressed was very God of very God, coessential with the Father. A Unitarian, whether Paul of Samosata or of more recent type, may well conclude that Athanasius improved matters, just as he may sympathize with Augustine when the great African declares that the whole Trinity was in Jesus and that the distinctions which make a Trinity correspond to distinguishable activities of the one human spirit.

But I revert to Dr. Faulkner's main intentions. The Athanasian development he regards as the historically legitimate, the true expression of the real view of earlier Fathers in the second and third century, just as the Arian view was a kind of aberration from an incautious defect in these earlier Fathers. And the reduction of the Athanasian view to a legal formula enforced by political coercion he regards as the only salvation of Christianity as a religious force, "not alone on ancient records but as a regnant and regenerative force in humanity." By this consideration of the subject Dr. Faulkner discovers the inherent necessity of the doctrine, its place in the essence of Christianity. Historical inevitability is one thing, inherent integral necessity is another. Given the historical conditions, the limitations of human knowledge in any given generation, the prevalence of a given cosmology, the development of the ancient dogma is then an intelligible story. "Putting ourselves back at the point of view of the men who made the decisions, and imagining ourselves faced with like questions, we should have been obliged to answer them in the same way" (William Adams Brown, *The Trinity and Modern Thought*, p. 12). But this is because the development in question was not the development of religion in isolation from other elements. It was the development of an amalgam of the religion of Jesus with an ancient philosophy and with a sacramentalism both extraneous in origin. It does not matter how early the application of the Logos idea is made, whether in the second or first century; it still remains the application of a pagan philosophical conception for philosophical purposes, as a substitute for the simpler, original Palestinian idea of the Messiah, and it is held in union with the ethical

religion of Jesus by the "physical theory" of redemption which found its final expression in the sacrament of the Eucharist. There remains therefore the question whether the religion of Jesus required for its life and permanency this amalgamation with other elements. To claim the affirmative, one must show that the actual religious experience which is at the heart of all things Christian required this association with a Logos-doctrine and the eucharist theory. We are therefore struck by the patent fact that the Christian piety in epochs of greatest vitality has been only mechanically related to the Logos doctrine or its final Trinitarian formula or the Greek eucharistic doctrine. The religious experience sought and induced by Jonathan Edwards in Northampton banished from mind the mystery of inner relations of the Godhead. Luther consciously distinguished the dogma of the ecumenical councils from Christianity as religion, as experience of God. The dogma was not to be explicated from the religion as such, but must be accepted on past church authority, *ungemeisterter geglaubt*. "Hoc est Christum cognoscere—beneficia ejus cognoscere": Dr. Faulkner knows the context in Melanchthon's *Loci*. It is not difficult to show that Christian religious experience as evidenced by Francis or Bernard or Augustine found the dogma a somewhat extraneous thing. And when Dr. Faulkner starts from certain thinkers of the early church whom we call the Fathers, is he starting from the religious sphere to illustrate the necessity of the development? Tertullian and Origen will remind him that the hypostatic doctrine was in their time the position of the few, of the man of intellectual theory and not of the mass of believers. After church councils had voted the dogma, the young Augustine was reared in a circle which was still Adoptionist (*Conf. 7. 19 [25.]*) and only late and with difficulty mastered the idea of the established dogma. His churchmanship made him obedient, though his own theologizing robbed the dogma of its intended meaning and his piety continued to be the piety of Adoptionism. But most of all we may turn back to the religion of the synoptic Jesus, the being whose relation to God is interpreted by the dogma. The whole labor of devout historical study has been wasted on the man who can discover there any doctrine of the Trinity, any pre-existence of the Son, any mystery of God becoming man. The religion of Paul affirmed Christ's pre-existence but where did it affirm the doctrine of the Trinity? In all ages Christian piety affirms that God was in Christ reconciling the world to himself, but the history of Christian piety shows that the particular elucidation of this faith in terms of the Trinitarian dogma is an intellectual speculative effort required only by a cosmology that relegates to the rank of a barren absolute the Presence that Jesus named Father. I have said enough to indicate that the dogma is not essential to Christianity as religion.

All the more we regret that it should be deemed the only salvation of Christianity as religion when a party formula was made compulsory by coercive authority. The hatreds and persecutions, the fanatic insistence on speculative formula with a shocking sacrifice of the Christian life which Jesus and Paul and John proclaimed as salvation—these are the proof positive that Christianity had gone astray. The subsidence of the struggle, the return to that devout faith which as Eusebius of Caesarea said at the beginning was consistent with ignorance of the mystery of the Trinity, was and is the condition of the real activity of Christianity—a life in and with the Father of Love and Forgiveness, a life consecrated to the love which is the law of his kingdom. Dr. Faulkner thinks that this spiritual energy would have perished but for the enactment of a formula against a handful of Arians and the enforcement of the formula by political power. Against this skeptical judgment I would set another: The symbol of Nicaea inaugurated a mania for fixed and irreformable definitions, a consequent scholasticism, a cessation of thought, a weakening of the moral force of the church, a period of superstitious ritualism.

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RELIGION AND MIRACLE¹

The significance of this book by the minister of the Old South Church of Boston lies not so much in its argument as in the circumstances of its appearance. Even though reading it with sympathy and a general agreement with its aim, one may doubt whether it has set forward the discussion of the miraculous in relation to religion either on its philosophical or its biblical side. Yet the book is significant, highly so, for all who are interested in the vast transformation which the Christian faith, wherever held in freedom and open to modern thought, is surely and in great part silently undergoing.

Wherein, then, is it significant? We reply, because it is the first (or, if not strictly the *first*, at least the most conspicuous) case of an evangelical pastor of national reputation who has openly taught that the miraculous works of Jesus are no part of the essence of the Christian religion, but only the “fringe” of his “evangelical career,” and also because it is the first publication by such a person of the view—more radical than the other—that the alleged supernatural birth and bodily resurrection of Jesus can be disregarded without essential loss.

¹ George A. Gordon, Minister of the Old South Church, Boston, *Religion and Miracle*, Houghton Mifflin Co., October, 1909.